Chapter 1: January

Alright, well. I think it’s official. This is the fourth door in a row to reject my key card.

I’m completely lost.

I stare down again at the map drawn on a scrap of paper I was given on intake, trying to retrace my steps. Maybe I should just… call them? The guys I’m supposed to be meeting have apparently been here for at least a decade already. They should be able to track my inept ass down and show me where the enclosure is, right?

I pull the yellow flip phone out of my pocket only to stare at it, and then pocket it again. One more door, I tell myself, and I’ll suck it up and call.

The halls of this facility are long and sprawling, and lined with doors. I’m not even completely sure all of these doors actually go somewhere; this is a government black site, after all. I guess it would make sense that they’d want to confuse someone who doesn’t belong.

Funny, considering this is supposed to be my first day working here.

Maybe Lori was right.

I turn down another hallway, and approach a pair of double doors. I swipe.

Beep.

It’s a miracle.

I push my way through only to be greeted by another hallway, but at least this is progress? I think?

Just as I was beginning to feel confident, I felt something vibrating in my pocket.

I unsheathe my phone.

Dammit.

“H-Hello, this is–”

“Eric Collins, right?”

I wince a bit at my legal name.

“Yup, th-that’s me. Is this Robert Dieter?”

“It’s pronounced ‘Deeter’. Where are you? You’re late.”

“I’m… a little lost–”

“Were you not given a map?”

I sigh, feeling stupid. “Yes, but–”

“Where are you right now?”

“Um.” I wasn’t sure how I was supposed to describe a place that for the most part all looked the same. “I’m by a pair of double doors?”

“Stay there, I’ll come get you.”

Click.

I stare apprehensively at my phone before placing it back in my pocket. I hadn’t even met the man yet and I already felt that he didn’t like me. With a sigh, I sit down on the floor, waiting. Wouldn’t that be something if I got fired on my first day? Over my poor sense of direction, of all things?

Just thinking about it puts a pit in my stomach.

I'd have to go back. I'd have to face Lori, and listen to her I-Told-You-So's and belittlement. On the way to the airport yesterday, she wouldn't stop telling me all the ways I'm not ready for true independence, how I'm going to crash and burn on my own. That people like me don't last long in real jobs.

A large part of me believes her.

But on the other hand, would they really have hired me to do something as hush-hush as… whatever this is going to be if they didn't see something they liked?

I hear footsteps approaching, and I quickly get to my feet.

A tall, thin, and much older man comes around the corner. He's wearing tan slacks and a light blue dress shirt, with a black tie. His hair is gray and styled in a combover to poorly hide his balding head, and his eyes are a piercing green.

He pauses, looking me over, as if confused.

"Collins?" he asks. His voice matches the one I'd heard over the phone.

"Y-Yes, sir."

"Oh, for heaven's sake," he spits. "How old are you?"

I swallow. I know I look young for my age, and the braces probably don't help. "Twenty-four?"

He mumbles something irately to himself before turning his attention on me again. "Well, come on then."

I quietly follow him through the hall, my stomach in knots.

"Forgive me," he says, a bit more gentle now. "I was expecting someone in at least his 30s. And maybe a bit… larger."

"Ah, I'm… sorry."

"Don't be. You can't do much about your height, but if you are to work here, I expect you to put a little meat on your bones."

I'm five foot two and maybe about 90 pounds. I know that's not great, but it's never been a problem at any of my internships. "Why?"

"Because our specimen will break you in half."

"E-excuse me?"

He smirks a bit as he swipes his card and opens a door to a staircase. "After you," he says with a gesture.

Nervously, I climb the stairs, and turn the corner at the top to find myself in a rectangular room with wide windows parallel to each other on the longest walls. The window to my left peers into what seems to be a big, white room, while the other overlooks the outdoors and numerous coniferous trees covered in a light dusting of snow.

At the far end of the room sits another man, younger than Dieter but older than me, in a rolling chair, casually throwing a ball against the wall and catching it again. He spins in the chair to face me and Dieter after catching the ball one more time.

“Oh, hey, I didn’t know we hired teenagers,” he says with a half laugh.

“Allegedly, he’s 24,” replies Dieter.

The man in the chair stands and approaches me, arm outstretched for a handshake. His lab coat sleeves are rolled up, and I couldn’t help but notice a severe amount of scarring on his left. It looks like a shark bite. “I’m Dale. You’re Eric, right?”

“Y-yeah,” I stammer out, gripping his hand tightly the way I was taught and then quickly letting go. “I p-prefer to go by Ejay though, if that’s okay.”

“No trouble at all,” says Dale. “You’re not gonna be seeing much of me after today anyway.”

“Oh?”

“He’s abandoning me,” sneers Dieter.

Dale grins. “Yup. You’re my replacement, kid.”

Dale is at least three times my weight, a full foot and some inches taller than I am, and, as friendly as he seems to be, deeply intimidating. If that matters as much as I’ve been lead to believe, then yeah, I can really understand why Dieter would be disappointed to see me standing there instead of anybody else.

“Have you told him what he’s in for yet?” Dale asks, an eyebrow raised.

Dieter looks me over again, and then moves toward the window that looks down into the room. “C’mere,” he says to me.

I follow him. He points down into the room at something curled up in the corner. I squint, not entirely sure what I’m looking at. It’s covered head to toe with gray fur and has a short tail and pointed ears, but it’s… wearing a medical gown, and seems to be anatomically closer to an ape than to a cat or a dog.

I tilt my head, confused, and look toward Dieter, who’s studying my reaction.

“What… is that?” I ask hesitantly.

“That,” he begins, “is X. lux number X042a, the first of its kind, and what we will be working with for the next fifteen years.”

“Provided it survives that long,” Dale adds.

“Ah, yes,” mumbles Dieter, with a frown.

He knocks at the window, waking the creature up. It turns its head to look up at us, and I see that it has orange eyes and orange skin in its ears. Its nose is almost too large for its face and black. It stares for a moment, then turns away again to go back to sleep.

“You wanna meet him, Ejay?” Dale asks.

Dieter looks over at his soon-to-be ex-coworker, his eyes a bit wide, as if afraid. “You think that’s a good idea?”

“I mean. He may as well meet the thing while it’s sleepy.”

“…I suppose.”

Dale gestures at me. “C’mon, follow me down.”

I do as I’m told, and we head down another flight of stairs. At the base of the stairs is another room with lockers and lab coats hanging on the wall. Dale points the coats out specifically.

“Grab one of them and put it on. It’ll protect you if the thing decides to, ah… act up.” Dale himself grabs what looks to be a cattle prod.

Nervously, I grab a coat, and put it on. It’s a little big on me, but that’s to be expected, given my size. We head through another door, and into the enclosure itself. Immediately upon our entering, the creature is up and staring at us from all fours. It hisses softly, showing a mouthful of triangular, jagged teeth.

“Ah, shit,” says Dale. He puts out a hand to prevent me from moving any further. “I was hoping it’d let us get a little closer than just through the door.”

Suddenly it snarls and its eyes light up with a fiery orange glow as it lunges towards us.

Quickly, Dale pushes me back into the room we’d just come from, quickly locking the door and leaning heavily against it. I hear a series of loud thumps, before all is quiet once more.

I can feel my heart thumping in my chest as I swallow hard. I’m panicking internally, but I’m doing my best to hide it. “What the hell kind of animal is that!?”

Dale laughs nervously. “That’s not too out of the ordinary these days.” He holds up his arm with the scarring. “He did this to me a few months back. Been incredibly aggressive since his cage mate died.”

“That… th-that doesn’t answer my question.”

Dale hesitates. “…A little of this, a little of that,” he says, almost sheepishly. “Honestly, we weren’t told too much. Just that we’re to study its behavior.” He stands up straight again and puts his cattle prod back on its hook. “Go ahead and take that lab coat off, we’re heading back up.”

Back upstairs, Dale sits down once again in his rolling chair. Dieter immediately turns his attention to me. “I saw what happened down there. Are you alright? You look pale.”

I wasn’t sure how to respond. I’d only ever worked with mice and rats before this; never something that could apparently fire lasers or… whatever that was. No animal on earth can do what that creature just did, so what was it? An alien? Some kind of biomechanical hybrid? Something else?

“Ejay?” prompted Dieter. “If you’d like to go home for the day, I’d understand.”

“I…” I stammered, “I-I think… I think I would like that, actually.”

Oh, no.

“Can you find your way back on your own?”

Oh, no.

“I-I should be able to, yeah.”

Stop it.

“Alright. I’ll see you tomorrow, then.”

Before I knew it, I found myself back in the labyrinth of hallways. As I reached the double doors, I stopped for a moment, leaning with my forearms against the wall, trying to hold back tears.

I can’t lose this job.

I can only imagine what they’re saying about me now that I’ve left. I bet Dieter’s already contacting our higher ups and telling them I’m not cut out for the job. He and Dale are obviously friends; I bet Dale’s having second thoughts about leaving. I would be if I were him–if I had any friends, I certainly wouldn’t want to leave them alone with that… thing. That little monster.

I’m going to be fired because I’m a coward.

I hesitate a moment longer. It would probably look strange if I head back to the enclosure now, so I force myself through the double doors, back through security, and onto the shuttle. I’ll come back tomorrow, and apologize for leaving. I’m not going to let that little demon scare me off from this opportunity to escape my old home for good.

Chapter 2: February

Time passed quickly. Dale, as he'd said he wouldn't be, was no longer around. I'd eventually learn from Dieter that he decided to leave in order to spend more time with family. This job requires at least six months out of each year living on-site, which is a lot of time to spend away when you have kids and a life back on the mainland. Dieter himself has two adult children and four grandkids, but despite this, like me, he's chosen to live full time at the facility.

"I retire in two more years," he says. "The amount of money I'll be getting is more than I'll ever be able to spend in the remainder of my life. I'm doing this for my kids, and their kids, and their kids' kids."

A noble enough cause.

"What about you?" he asks me while we watch X042a do a series of memory puzzles from the safety of a television screen. "Not a lot of young people choose to work here, what with the time requirements."

“Well…” I begin, “I guess I’m here because most other places were looking for people to do more unpaid internships.”

“Not interested in building your resume further?”

I hesitate. “It’s not that, I just… I needed to be paid for my work, that’s all. Before here, I had two jobs –one at a grocery store, and one as a busser at a restaurant, and I was doing an internship at a lab studying the effects of some new cancer drug on a group of rats, and I was also doing all that while trying to finish my Masters. It was running me ragged, and my aunt, she just…”

I pause for a moment, wondering if I should talk about her. “She just… wanted more and more money out of me for living there, and that, coupled with my student loans coming due…” I sigh. “I just needed to get out. This was the first place to hire me after searching for like, a year.”

“Don’t you have friends and other family? A girlfriend maybe?”

I snort-laugh a bit at the thought of ever having a girlfriend.

“I mean, other than my cat? I’m not leaving much behind.” I mark down how long it took 42 to solve the puzzle this time, as does Dieter in his own notes.

He pushes a button to administer a treat, and also resets the test once more.

“What about your parents? I assume you were living with your aunt for some sort of convenience.”

I fall silent. I guess ‘convenience’ is one way of putting it.

Dieter apparently sensed my discomfort. “I apologize if I’ve crossed a boundary”

“No, no, you’re fine,” I say, shaking my head. “My mom is dead, and my dad has OCD and schizoaffective disorder. And he’s a drunk. And a hoarder. And he doesn’t take his meds.”

Dieter raises an eyebrow. “I see.”

“Yeah.” I write down another note. “It’s… It’s behind me though. I’ve been living with my aunt since I was 10.”

We both go quiet as 42 watches panels light up, presses them in sequence, and then looks up at the camera instead of to the control panel, ignoring it as it flashes again.

“Do you think he knows we can see him?” I ask.

“Doubtful.” Dieter presses a button and a loud noise goes off in the enclosure, causing 42 to jump, and pay attention to the panels again. Dieter pushes another button to make the panels flash in sequence once more.

42 completes it quickly this time. Dieter administers another treat, and resets the test.

“Not only does this test his memory,” Dieter continues, “but it tests his attention span.” He writes down a few notes, then says, “He used to be able to focus for longer than this. What with the sudden aggression, and the lowered test scores, I’m wondering if I should have him checked for a brain tumor.”

“You really think he could have a problem like that?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised. He’s number 42 for a reason–all the ones before him either died in-vitro, or went shortly after decantation.” He presses a button that stops the test. “It turns out it’s not easy to create a functional, complex organism from scraps.”

I nod. “What happened to his cage mate?”

“Number 47 died of a heart defect that went undetected until its necropsy.”

“Ah.”

Dieter stands. “If you would be so kind as to file these notes away while I go down and clean up, I would appreciate that.”

I take his clipboard. “Y’know, why don’t I go down and clean up this time?”

Dieter frowns. “I… don’t think so.”

“Why not? I’ve watched you do it enough times now, I think I’ll be safe.”

“And if you’re wrong, he will pick you up and shatter your skull against the wall.” He begins to make his way to the stairs that lead down. “I will handle him directly. You will do this much safer thing.”

“I wanna be able to work with him though. He’s scary, but… really, really interesting.”

Dieter pauses, standing with the door open, looking me over with concern.

“Put on about 60 pounds, and then we’ll talk.”

He heads down. I just frown, and do as I’m told.

—

At home, I stand in front of the mirror as I change out of my work clothes. Usually I try to avoid looking at myself, but this time… well. I try to ignore the old cigarette burns and self-harm scars. I can see my ribs, and my hip bones jut out. My blue eyes look tired, and sunken.

I look sick.

Unwilling to continue staring at myself, I grab my computer and pull up a BMI chart. After noting what a normal weight for someone of my height should be, I then enter my bathroom, and step on the electronic scale that was already there when I moved in.

86 pounds, it reads.

I wince. Yeah, that's… pretty bad. 106 is the start of the "normal" zone, for someone my height.

I get dressed in a black sweater and a pair of black sweatpants, go to my kitchen, and ready a cup of instant noodles to microwave for dinner.

… Maybe I should start eating something other than ramen. That might be a good start. There's a gym here, too.

But I don't know how to cook, and I don't know a single thing about weightlifting. I live off of toaster pastries, energy drinks, and microwavables; Lori has called me a "cockroach" for my diet in the past.

I sigh, frustrated, and pull my noodles out of the microwave to eat.

—

The next morning I arrive at work. I stare down at 42, who's still asleep, while I wait for Dieter to get here. He's usually a couple minutes late.

… I wonder.

I head for the door that leads into the enclosure, make my way down, and stop just short of the final barrier. I'll just be in and out, I tell myself. It's fast asleep. It'll go differently this time.

I'm being driven by pure curiosity.

I snag a lab coat, and then nervously eye one of the cattle prods. I grab one before turning the doorknob, and entering.

Immediately, 42's ears perk and he looks in my direction.

He's not coming for me like he did the first time–instead, he's staring wide eyed at the cattle prod. I can hear a growl forming in his throat, warning me to keep my distance.

"Uh… h-hello," I say awkwardly, with a small wave.

A hiss.

Well, at least he's staying over there.

Carefully I begin to approach. If he gets up, I'll turn around and head straight for the door.

I can see his fur stand as he eyes me, and then the cattle prod.

I get a stupid idea.

I toss the cattle prod to the side, and hold up my hands. It clatters to the floor, and 42 tilts his head at me, as if confused. But he stops growling.

“Y-yeah, see? I’m not gonna hurt you. I just… wanna get a closer look, that’s all.”

Suddenly, 42’s eyes widen, and his ears flatten to his head as he lets out a loud hiss and his eyes light up.

I panic.

And then I feel myself getting grabbed around the waist from behind as Dieter pulls me backwards and pushes me back toward the door. I trip over myself and land painfully on my ass, scrambling to get back up. He brandishes his own cattle prod, getting ready to use it on 42, who is absolutely losing its mind.

And then I hear it.

“NO!” shouts 42 as it curls into a ball, terrified.

Dieter turns to me. “Get back upstairs. Now.”

I do as I’m told, badly shaken. I don’t even bother to hang the lab coat or put away the cattle prod, which I’d left behind anyway. I collapse into one of the rolling chairs, and wait for Dieter to come back, which he does. He’s furious.

“What the hell were you doing down there?”

“H-he was asleep, I–”

“NEVER enter that enclosure without myself present, do you understand?”

I lock up, unable to speak. Dieter continues, unaware of what his yelling is doing to me.

“Do you think I’m kidding when I say that thing will kill you? What do you think it’s for!?”

I can’t move.

Dieter continues, but I can’t hear him.

I’m so fucking stupid. I should’ve never come here. I’m too small to do my job. Too fragile to be yelled at by another man. I’m going to be fired. I’ll have to live with Lori again. I’ll kill myself if I have to go back there. I should kill myself now. I should–

I feel a hand on my shoulder.

My face is wet.

“Ejay.”

I snap out of it. Dieter is gently squeezing my shoulder, a look of worry on his aged face.

“Are you alright?”

I’m not sure what to say, so I blurt what I think is the obvious.

“I-It said ‘no’.”

Dieter is quiet for a moment.

“It didn’t say anything.”

“B-but it did, I–”

“It’s like a parrot,” he says slowly. “It can repeat words that it hears, but it doesn’t actually know what it’s saying.”

I sit there quietly. I can feel my entire body rocking steadily to the rapid beat of my heart. My head hurts.

“Ejay, are you okay?”

I’m not, but I can’t let him know that.

“P… P-please don’t yell at me in the future.”

“You could’ve been killed–”

“I-I know,” I say, waving a shaky hand. “I know.”

We stare at each other for a couple seconds.

“… I’ll keep that in mind,” he says quietly.

“Are you… a-are you going to report me to Eckert?” I ask.

“No, of course not,” he says. “Technically, you have just as much right to be down there as I do, but…” he places a hand to his head for a moment, before dropping it to his side again. “You’re just… so small. It’s not safe for you. It’s barely any safer for me, and I’m at least twice your size. Someone as young as you, I… I couldn’t handle it, if something were to happen.”

We’re both quiet.

I break the silence.

“Y’know, I… was thinking about what you said yesterday, about… wanting me to put on 60 pounds or whatever.”

He watches me, waiting for me to continue.

“I… just… I don’t know anything about… a-about how. Th-the most complicated thing I know how to cook is hard boiled eggs a-and they turn out green most of the time, and I’ve never lifted weights before, like… I-I’m genuinely clueless.”

He tilts his head. “I could help you with that, if you’d like. I am a former airman–I could teach you a thing or two about physical training.” He sits down on an adjacent chair and says, with a faint smirk, “And, not to brag, but I can do a bit more than hard boiled eggs.”

I didn’t know what to say. I was expecting him to shake his head in disappointment, or to give me an ultimatum; not to offer help. I’m not sure which of those options is worse, frankly. Accepting his help means taking up his time; at least disappointment means I’m not actively being a burden. It just… also means I can’t properly work here. Which means I’d have to go home.

“I-I, uh.”

“Think on it,” says Dieter as he gets back to his feet. “I have plenty of free time after work and on the weekends.”

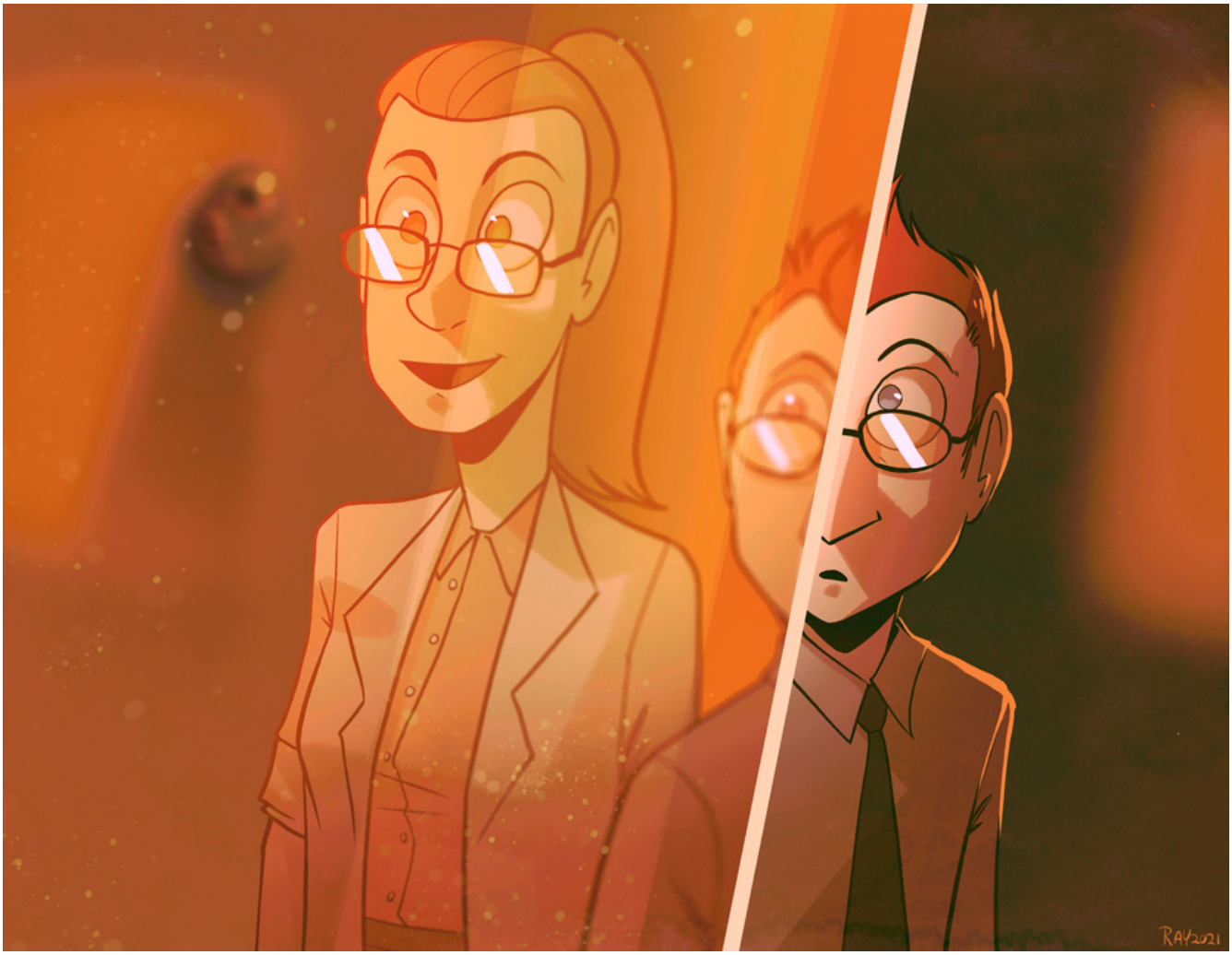
I stammer. “I-if you genuinely want to help me, I… Please.”

He chuckles a bit at how awkward I am. “How does tomorrow night sound? I’ll bring some food, we’ll cook it together, and maybe you’ll learn something.”

We spend the rest of our work day talking about food and his time in the military while doing clerical work and making plans for a new test.

Despite the remainder of our time together going smoothly, I couldn’t help but feel that 42 yelling the word “no” was a bit too situationally specific. Something felt off, and I knew it was going to nag at me until I found out for sure.

Chapter 3: March



Weeks flew by without further incident. Of course, Dieter wasn't allowing me any time alone in the lab –he'd been arriving earlier to work than myself since the encounter with 42.

I guess he didn't trust me.

Otherwise, he'd been coming over to my apartment at least twice a week to cook a meal with me. Things seemed to be going well in that respect; I haven't lit myself on fire yet, anyway. It was strange seeing him in something other than work attire. He looked like any other grandpa.

He also made good on his promise to show me how to work out. He picked on me a bit for my insistance on wearing long sleeves, but for the most part he was gentle with me. He didn't say anything about my lack of physical strength–no chastising for being weak, or for not knowing what a kettlebell was. Only encouragement came from him. I didn't have to be afraid to ask questions, or to ask for help with my form. He didn't force me beyond my limits.

I don't think he knew how much things like that meant to me. Back home, I was constantly trying to hide–if I couldn't do something, or if I did it wrong, I would absolutely hear about it in a less than kind

way. It was expected of me to do whatever my aunt wanted–or else–and it was considered out of line for me to expect anything in return, especially when I was still a minor. In her mind, I owed her everything for taking me in, and she was making sure I repaid her for her sacrifice. Numerous times, I was threatened with being sent back to live with my father.

As an adult, I know that was an empty threat. At the time, though, it was very effective.

But it wasn't like that with Dieter. He never threatened me. He never expected anything for his time spent. He didn't quite treat me like an equal, but he did at least treat me like a person.

I don't know why this made me cry, but it did. Multiple times, when I was alone, I'd find myself sobbing over everything he was doing for me. It didn't feel bad, per se, but it absolutely seemed like a strange reaction to have.

I'd already managed to gain 5 pounds, too, and I couldn't quite be sure yet, but it seemed like my hair was starting to grow again. I hadn't needed to shave it in months, and until now I'd been so busy I didn't realize.

I had no idea I was so unhealthy.

I cried over this, too.

Today at work, however, things were a little different. Dieter had moved forward with getting 42 tested for a brain tumor, and he's sending me off to the East Facility to pick up the results in person. I suspect he wants physical documents because he doesn't much like using the computer. Multiple times now, he'd use the fact that I'm a Millennial as an excuse to have me prepare and send test results digitally to Eckert, instead of doing it himself. Considering I wasn't allowed near 42, I was happy to be useful in other ways.

I exited the shuttle and made my way through the East Facility's security checkpoint. I was determined this time to find my way without any help in this new place despite this facility being roughly as confusing as the West one. Unlike the West Facility, however, it was far more populated here and it certainly seemed like every door did in fact lead to somewhere.

I much preferred the relative isolation of the West Facility.

I did my best not to make eye contact with any of the staff, wanting to remain somewhat invisible. Fortunately for me, the veterinary department wasn't too far off from the shuttle. I was the only person there today, it seemed.

At the reception desk sat a woman who couldn't be too much older than myself. She had long, straight, light brown hair tied back in a pony tail, and bright green eyes. Her ID card, which I can see lying on her desk through the plexiglass, reads "Cheryl Reede".

"Hello!" she said cheerily. "What facility and wing are you from, and what can I do for you?"

"W-West facility, west wing. I'm looking for 42's test results."

She types something into her computer. She tilts her head. "Are you new here?"

“Y-yeah, why?”

“Because you’re not Bob or Dale.” She looks at me. “42’s results aren’t in just yet. Can I see your ID card real quick?”

“Um, yes.”

I pull the card from my pocket and hand it over the desk. She scans it.

“… Alright, thank you,” she says as she hands my ID back to me. “Just wanted to make sure you actually have clearance for this.”

“Do… do you have problems with that a lot, or?”

A stupid question.

“Nah, it’s just… something I’m supposed to do.” She takes a moment to type something in, and then turns back to me. “Y’know, we usually email test results like this when they’re in. Makes things easier.”

“I-I figured, but Dieter wanted me to come pick them up in person.”

“Ah, so he’s made you his gofer.” She points over to the waiting area. “If you’d like to sit down, I can head back and harass some people into getting those results in for you.”

I laugh nervously. “Heh, thank you.” I move to the waiting area and sit down. She gets up and heads through a security door.

Unsure what to do with my hands, I sit there and pick at a hangnail on my thumb, and stare at a fake monstrum sitting in the corner.

After a few minutes, she comes back.

“Alright, Eric, it turns out those results need another 45 minutes to cook.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

There’s an awkward silence between us.

“I-I can wait, if you’re okay with that.”

She raises an eyebrow at me. “I mean, if you’re fine sitting in here with nothing to do, by all means. Personally, I could use the company.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. I’ve been here for about 8 hours, and you’re the second person to come in.”

“Oh, damn.”

Another awkward silence.

“So how do you like it here? You miss home yet?”

“Oh, god, no,” I say, maybe a little too enthusiastically. “I really like it here so far.”

“Really?” she asks, sounding surprised. “I can’t wait to get back home, personally.”

“I’m living here full time.”

“Oh, I could never do that,” she says. “Not just because I miss my folks; I’m working toward my doctorate.”

“What’re you going for?”

“Molecular biology,” she responds. “I have a Masters right now, but that’s not enough to do the fun stuff.”

“‘Fun stuff?'”

“Well, yeah. I want to be part of the Genesis department eventually.”

I sat there for a moment, unsure of what to say.

“Have you ever been down to the basement?”

“The what now?”

“I’ll take that as a ‘no’,” she says. She looks at her watch. “I get off in about 10 minutes if you’d like to check that out with me. It’s really pretty.”

“What’s down there?”

“Embryos floating in big, glowing orange vats,” she says with a grin.

I sit there for a moment in stunned silence. “What?”

She laughs a bit, “Oh gosh, yeah, you’re extremely new, aren’t you? Where do you think that critter you work with came from?”

She had a point. And I guess that at least partially answered a question I had. “Have you ever met 42?” I ask.

“Oh, no, I’ve never seen one outside of the tanks. I’m not allowed to say too much, but there’s some pretty wild shit down there.”

“There’re other things besides Xs?”

“I didn’t say that,” she says, almost too quickly. “You’ve heard of the donor program, right?”

We continue talking until her shift is over. Another person comes to take her place, and together we head out. Now that she’s standing, I see that she’s roughly half a head taller than I am. We get onto an elevator, she swipes her card, and we descend.

“There’s another security checkpoint once we get down there,” she says. “It’s nothing like the one upstairs by the shuttle–they only allow one person entry at a time to prevent someone who doesn’t have clearance from entering a door they shouldn’t. I’ll go in first.”

“O-okay,” I say nervously.

We reach our floor, and exit the elevator together. She swipes her card, and disappears beyond the checkpoint. After a moment, I too am invited to cross the barrier. I swipe my card, and, unlike her, I am escorted by an airman to a specific door, down a hall of many.

I wish I’d been given directions to the proper door, honestly–this large man makes me anxious.

I swipe my card when we stop. The lock clicks open, and I enter. Cheryl is there waiting for me. It’s very dark, but I can see an orange glow coming from just around the corner.

“I forgot–they escort you if you don’t have access to everything like I do.”

“I see that,” I mumble.

“He’ll be waiting by the door when we leave to take us back,” she says. “C’mon, let’s go.”

We head down the short corridor and turn the corner.

My eyes widen.

At least twenty large vats, most with something visibly floating inside, illuminate the room. She moves forward, and I follow, staring around at everything.

“Isn’t it something?” she asks.

It was eerily beautiful, while at the same time macabre. I could see their little hearts beating through their translucent skin, illuminated by the orange glow of what I assumed to be the heating unit inside the vat.

It was almost unbearably hot in this room, but we stayed and talked together anyway as we walked around and examined each vat. It was nice to have someone around my age to talk to for once–truth be told, I hadn’t spoken much to anyone other than Dieter since coming here. It felt good to finally make a friend.

… Maybe calling us “friends” was a bit too forward. “Acquaintances” was probably more accurate. It’s always been hard for me to tell, and the last thing I want to do is come off as creepy or clingy.

Before I knew it, a half hour had passed, and it was time for me to head back up and get those test results.

We say our good-byes, she heads for the shuttle, and I head back to the veterinary office.

Turns out, 42 is completely healthy.

There goes Dieter’s hypothesis.

—

I make my way back to the West Facility, and midway up the stairs to the observation deck, I pause.

“You’ve been jerking me around since January, and now you’re telling me there’s nothing you can do? Are you kidding me?”

There’s a silence. I’m assuming he’s talking to Eckert on the phone. I continue my ascent, when I hear something that makes my heart sink.

“You don’t understand. That kid you sent me is a hazard. I’m down here every day essentially doing this job by myself because he’s not strong enough to help me. I want him transferred. Send me a real employee.”

Involuntarily, I find myself sitting down on the steps.

“I’ve been doing what I can with him, but he’s just not cut out for this job. I don’t want to be responsible for this.”

Another pause.

“Maybe have him do something in the East Facility, I don’t know. They work with mice and rats over there, don’t they? That’s more in his wheelhouse.”

I sit there with a pit in my stomach.

“I will be pestering you about this whenever I can, I hope you know. I shouldn’t be expected to teach my adult employee how to cook for himself and work out just to clear my own conscience if something were to happen to him.”

There is another pause, and then, “We’ll see about that.” He snaps his flip phone shut.

I guess he’s done talking.

I sit there for a while longer.

I don’t know what I’m feeling right now.

Eventually, I stand up and force a smile as I continue up the steps, and into the observation deck.

“Ah, Ejay,” Dieter greets me. “I was worried you’d gotten lost.”

“Nope,” I say. “The results just… needed a little while longer to be ready, that’s all.” I hand him the file with the test results inside.

He takes them and has a look. He frowns.

“Well, then…”

“Y-Yeah, I saw, too.”

He shuts the folder and sets it aside.

“You know, Ejay,” he begins. “This is off-topic, but I’ve been thinking. You’re good with computers, right?”

“I guess I am.”

“You’re better than me,” he says. “Eckert’s been nagging me about digitizing some old trial tapes.”

“Tapes?” I blink.

“Mmhm,” he says. “Everything was still analog until fairly recently. I was hoping you’d be able to start that project for me. There are a lot of them, and I don’t know where to begin.”

He heads back toward the stairs. “Here, follow me.”

We head downstairs together, around a corner, and to another door. He swipes his card, and we enter.

It’s a small storeroom filled with boxes upon boxes, all with dates written on them, some dated all the way back to the 1980s. There’s a futon and a file cabinet in one corner.

“O-oh.” I stammer. “Are all of these–?”

“All of them.”

Jesus Christ.

After a moment of taking in the workload, I speak. “Y-yeah. I can do it.”

“Thank you.”

“I’ll start today, if you’d like.”

“That would be excellent. Everything you need should be in this room already.”

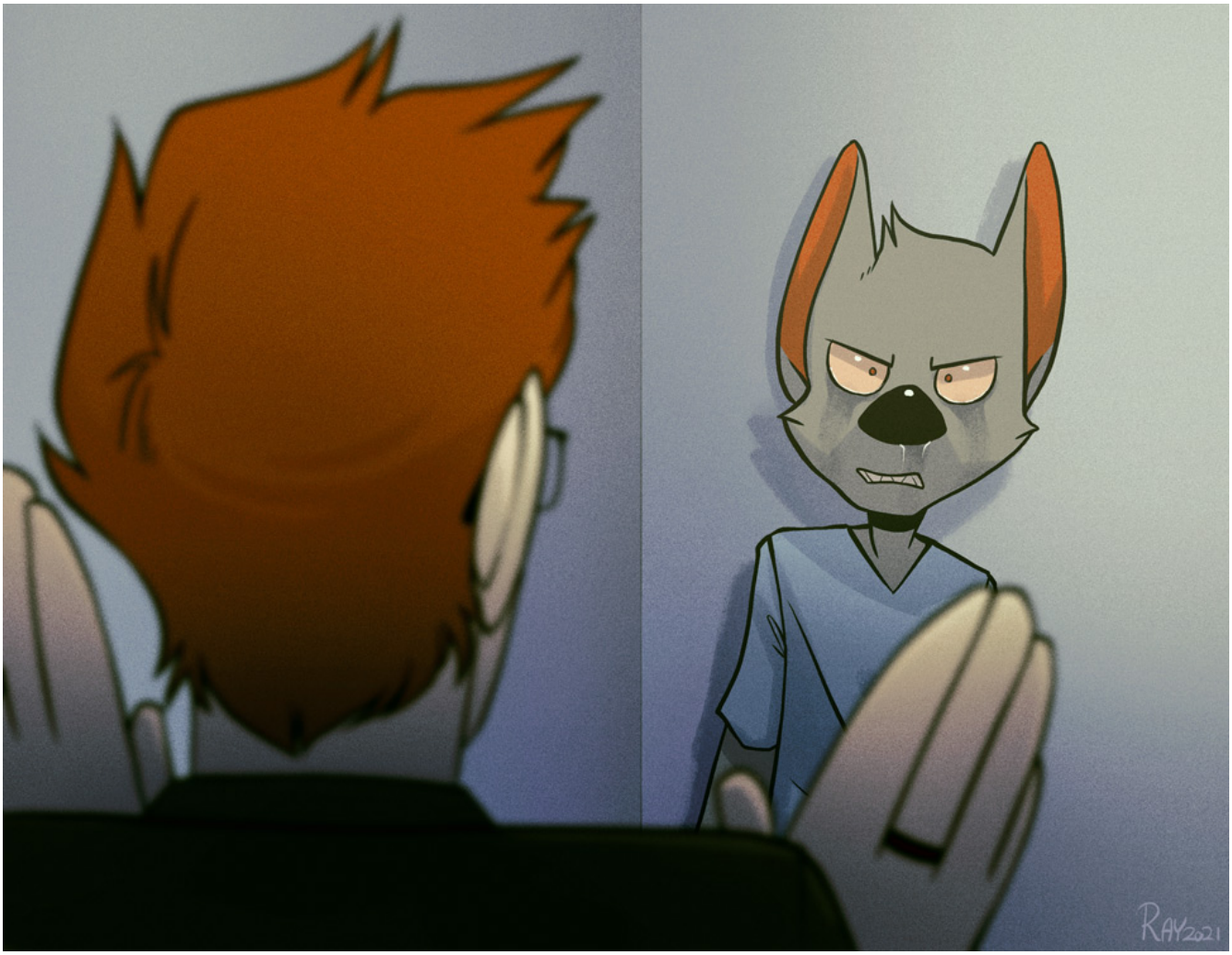
He leaves.

I stand there for a bit before crossing the room and flopping down on the dusty futon.

After a moment of staring off into the blank wall in front of me, I start crying.

I knew what I was feeling now: betrayal.

Chapter 4: April



Since overhearing the conversation Dieter'd had with Eckert on the phone, I had gradually come up with excuses to put a stop to our time together. We'd gone from two meals a week together, to one, to none, and I'd put an end to our working out together as well, claiming that I could do it on my own.

I couldn't. I didn't. I'd gone back to my old eating habits, as well. It was all less work, and I just didn't feel up to it anymore.

Why put in the effort? If Dieter was pestering Eckert as much as he'd claimed on the phone, I was eventually going to be reassigned to something else soon anyway. Besides, it's hard to care about yourself when it feels like nobody cares about you. I'm just a burden, as always.

Eventually, I was only going upstairs to show Dieter I was still turning up to work. All of my time was being spent in that little storage room, digitizing tape after tape. I wasn't sure what he made of my new behavior, but he didn't question it.

While waiting for tapes to transfer to the digital format, I'd found myself watching the newer, already digital footage of 42 and 47 together. They seemed inseparable–I'd catch them holding hands whenever

Dieter or Dale would approach, but there wasn't any hissing or aggressive behavior, like what I'd witnessed in person. There was footage of them working alone and together to solve puzzles. They seemed to communicate visually, which was interesting.

I thought back to when I'd heard 42 shout the word "no" and how specific it was to the situation.

Clearly 42 has the capacity to communicate in some sort of language, otherwise teamwork like what I'd been witnessing on the the older footage would be impossible. Could his use of that word really be nothing more than parroting? Did he pick that specific noise to make based on some context he'd heard it used in before?

… Isn't that what verbal communication is, though? Making specific noises based on context?

But what if he only said "no" because it's an easy sound to make, and it had nothing to do with what was happening?

I furrow my brow, thinking.

Could it be that he could talk, he just didn't in front of people who've hurt him? I definitely found myself incapable of speech in front of my dad in the past. Could he just have selective mutism?

Should I even be humanizing him in that way?

Thinking about this was beginning to make me feel ill. I thought back to the conversation I'd had with Cheryl, about the donor program. Apparently, genetic donations made via that program frequently ended up in experimental use, although she wasn't entirely sure of the specifics. Or she just couldn't tell me.

It'd already been implied to me that 42 was some kind of hybrid. But there's no way human DNA could've been used in his creation, could it? Surely that would be illegal?

… Although, thinking about how things like synthetic insulin is made, maybe not.

But creating insulin via gene insertion versus creating a nonhuman organism with the speech capabilities of a human had to be considered two different things, right? The legalities of genetic engineering was beyond me. How far was too far?

I slump backwards onto the futon, conflicted. I'd be bringing these thoughts to Dieter, if I still felt comfortable talking to him.

There's a knock at the door, and Dieter comes in.

"Just checking in on you," he says. "It's past quitting time."

"It is?" I check the clock on my phone.

It was.

I look down at my work. "I'm still waiting for this tape to finish up."

“I see,” he responds. “Well, don’t stay too long if you can help it. Work will still be here in the morning.”

“I know,” I say. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Good night, Ejay.”

“‘Night.”

He closes the door, and, presumably, begins making his way to the shuttle.

I sit there for a moment, before realizing: I was alone. For the first time in a while, it was just me.

I could visit 42, and Dieter wouldn’t be there to stop me.

I get to my feet and make my way up into the observation deck. I stop just short of the door that leads back down into 42’s enclosure.

Do I really want to do this?

After thinking for a few moments, I shrug, open the door, and begin my descent.

I don’t grab a lab coat.

I don’t grab a cattle prod.

I knew this was careless, but I guess I didn’t see a reason to care. I’d remembered he stopped hissing at me when I’d dropped the cattle prod that time. Maybe going in without one would lead to a more docile reaction from him.

Alternatively, if he ended up killing me, it would mean I’d never have to go home, if instead of a reassignment Eckert was trying to decide if I should be fired.

42 is awake this time, but he doesn’t look at me. I hear sniffling.

Is he crying?

“…42?” I say gently.

His ears perk. He turns to look at me. I see tears streaming down his face, which he wipes away using the back of his hand. He’s looking me over, probably searching for a cattle prod. But he’s not growling or hissing.

We both freeze, staring at each other.

“Do… you understand me?” I ask, not knowing what to expect.

He says nothing. He just looks away again, ignoring me, and leans the side of his head into the wall.

Well, alright then.

I move a bit closer, and sit down near him.

I ask my question again. “Do you understand me?”

He jumps to his feet, pressing his back into the wall. I guess he didn’t realize how close I was until I’d spoken. He stares at me. I can hear a growl forming in his throat.

I hold up my hands. “I won’t hurt you.” I’m trying my hardest to keep my movements and tone as gentle as possible. “I just want to talk.”

He continues to glare at me, still growling softly.

“Talk,” he says.

I couldn’t tell if that was a demand, or if he was just repeating what I’d said.

“Yeah. Talk,” I said.

“Talk,” he repeated, squinting. He hesitates for a moment, before pointing at me. “42.”

I shake my head, and place a hand on my chest. “Ejay.” I point at him. “42.”

He points up toward the windows of the observation deck. “Dieter.”

I can feel my heart quicken its pace. That was definitely mindful speech. “Oh my god,” I say under my breath. “No Dieter,” I say to him. “Just Ejay.”

He stares at me a moment longer.

And then his eyes light up.

I feel myself being lifted off the ground, though he’s not touching me, and then thrown through the air, my back hitting hard against the wall. Terrified, and in pain, I curl up into a ball. I can hear 42 scampering toward me. I peer through my fingers up at him, his hands and eyes flaming with orange light.

“47,” he says.

He lifts me off the ground again. I can feel the pressure growing as he slowly begins crushing me against the wall.

“S-Stop–”

“47,” he says again, louder.

I gasp for air. “I-I don’t know what you–”

“47!” he shouts.

“I’m… sorry… I don’t know…”

He keeps his hold on me a moment longer, before letting me drop to the floor. I crumple.

“Dieter,” he says, anger in his voice.

“I-I don’t know what you want.”

He stares at me, and then sits down on the floor. He presses his hands against his closed eyes, clearly frustrated, then looks at me again. “Why?”

“Why what?”

He opens and closes his mouth a few times, faltering. He then gives up, stands, and returns to his preferred corner of the room.

I take this as an opportunity to leave.

—

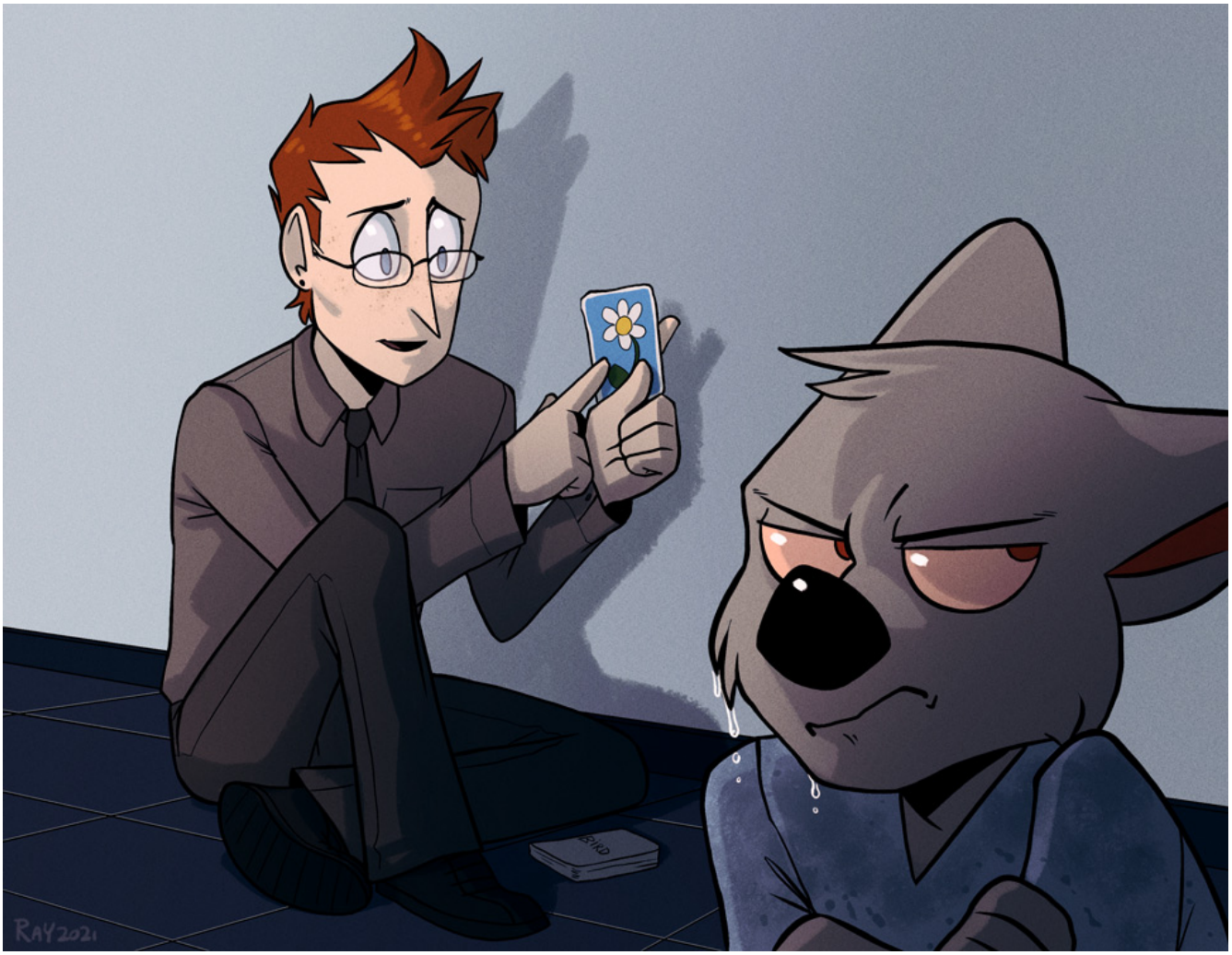
At home, I lay on my bed, staring up at the ceiling. Fortunately, the encounter only gave me minor bruising and a few small scrapes that would be easy enough to hide. I was going to be sore for a little while. 42 clearly wasn’t as blood thirsty as I was lead to think. But he was definitely angry, and absolutely smarter.

He understood that I didn’t understand. I think that’s why he let me go. But what was he trying to tell me? In the moment, I was too afraid he was going to kill me to think much.

47 had died due to a heart defect–did he not realize his friend was gone? Was he upset that they took him away, and never brought him back? That would certainly upset me, if my closest friend was just… gone, and I had no idea why. Surely, neither Dieter nor Dale would’ve explained to him what happened. They thought he was just a parrot.

Maybe I could help him grasp that his friend wasn’t coming back.

Chapter 5: May



Days turned into weeks. Every night after work I'd sneak down to visit 42, and every night, he'd throw me against the wall and I'd cowardly leave the room. It almost felt like he was making a game out of it –the object being, how quickly he could get me to leave. So far his record was about 3 seconds.

Fortunately for me, all the bumps and bruises were easily hidden under my work clothes, although I was certainly moving more slowly as time went on. Dieter was none the wiser, as far as I could tell. All he'd have to do to catch me in what I was doing is view the night footage, which apparently he never did.

Speaking of footage, I'd noticed a discrepancy.

There were dark patches here and there in the experiment footage, which I assumed were caused by either glitches or negligence, but the footage of 47's death was flat out missing. It jumped straight from the two of them doing a puzzle, to 42 sitting in his corner, alone.

It was strange enough that I thought I'd ask Dieter about it during lunch.

“There was a big investigation,” he said between bites of his salad. “It turned out an IT guy who had access to both the main servers and the backup servers had gone rogue and deleted all the footage from all experiments taking place that day.”

“Why?”

“Who could say why people do the things they do?” he shrugged. “He was promptly let go. Perhaps he was upset with his working conditions.”

Dieter pointed to what I was eating, changing the subject. “I thought you gave up that ramen crap?”

Tonight, I hoped things would go differently with 42. During my digitizing, I’d discovered a set of documents that stated 42’s powers could be neutralized temporarily with water.

Why the hell weren’t we just doing that?

It was something else I could ask about later.

For now, I have my cup of water. I look out the window and down into the enclosure. I can see 42 waiting near the door for me. Clearly this has become a routine for him now.

I head down, and open the door. He lights up, but before he has a chance to grab me, I splash.

Dripping wet, he gave me the most offended look I think I’d ever seen. He tries twice to light up, before realizing he can’t.

It worked.

Unless he was planning on biting me, we had to spend time together now.

“That’s right,” I said. “I figured out how to shut you down.” I point to his corner. “Go sit over there.”

He looks over to his corner, and then he glares at me.

“No.”

“Tough,” I say. “Go.”

He clenches his little fists, and then stomps over and sits down in his corner. He crosses his arms, still glaring. Eerily, like a child.

“Thank you.”

I reach into my bag, and pull out a stack of flash cards I’d put together, printed, and cut out myself. It was much faster than ordering them.

“So since you can talk,” I said, “I thought it’d be fun to teach you some new words. Maybe get you to say a sentence or two.”

42 flicks his ears, irate. I wasn't sure if he understood me or not.

"Cold," he said.

"Well, that's your own fault."

I sit down in front of him, and point at the picture on the front of the card. It's of a flower.

"What is this?"

He squints his eyes. He looks confused.

I guess he'd never seen one before.

"It's a flower. Can you say 'flower'?"

"No."

Alright.

I flip to a new card.

"Can you say 'bird'?"

Quickly, he snatches the card from my hand, and stuffs it in his mouth. He has a smug look on his face as he chews, as if he thinks he's teaching me a lesson.

I slouch back and glance away from him, annoyed.

"They're not food, you brat."

He spits the mangled, soggy card back out. "47."

I go quiet.

"47," he repeats, slower this time.

"Do you want to talk about 47?" I ask him gently.

"Dieter." He starts gesturing. I have no idea what he's trying to tell me.

"… 47 is gone," I say gently. "He's not coming back."

42 sighs, frustrated, and begins pulling at his hair.

"H-hey, don't–"

He smacks my hand away as I try to stop him. "No."

I stare at him, and he sits there quietly. He then says, very slowly, “47. Dieter,” pokes me hard in the chest with his finger while making a buzzing noise, falls over, and then stops moving.

For a moment, I’m worried, and then he looks up at me from his slumped position.

Slowly, the gears in my head begin turning.

There’s no way.

I get up and go into the room with lab coats. I come out with a cattle prod. At first, 42 looks terrified, until I sit down in front of him, and point to it.

“Dieter?” I ask.

He hesitates before nodding. “47.” And then falls over again.

I sit there for a moment, then pick up the chewed card, get up, and leave the enclosure.

—

I pace in circles around my apartment.

He knew his friend wasn’t coming back. He was trying to tell me that Dieter killed him, with a cattle prod. Before, when he was pinning me to the wall, he was trying to ask me why. Maybe he thought I already knew what happened? I’m glad he figured out that I didn’t.

I stop what I’m doing, and sit down on the floor with my back against my bed.

I’m the only person who cared enough about that–let’s face it, he’s a child–to try and sit down and talk with him. Everyone before me discounted his simple word use as nothing more than mimicry.

This kid needs me to stay in this department, doesn’t he.

After everything he’s been through, he needs at least one person who understands that there’s a person behind those bright orange eyes of his.

Should I tell Dieter that I know what happened? Should I tell him that 42 is much, much smarter than either of us thought? That there’s something human in there? That there was likely something human inside of 47 as well?

Slowly, I stand up.

I hadn’t eaten anything aside from that ramen at lunch today.

If 42 needs me, then… I should probably take better care of myself, shouldn’t I?

I grab my keys and a backpack, and head out to go grocery shopping. There’s nothing but more ramen here.

… I wonder if Eckert knew.

—

The next morning, I made my way to work. It was a beautiful, warm, sunny day. I'd actually bothered to eat breakfast, and made myself a lunch. Tonight, after my time with 42, I also planned to go to the gym for the first time in over a month.

I wanted to help him. I wanted him to trust me. Having someone who needed me made me feel like I meant something. It made me feel there was a reason to care for myself.

Sometime today, during my digitizing, I would call Eckert. I got the feeling he had no idea about the cattle prod detail. I felt that if he knew, and if it were common knowledge in the department, Dieter would've told me about it instead of leaving it simply at a "heart defect".

I enter the observation deck, and am met with Dieter, who's clearly been waiting for me.

"Good morning, Ejay," he said, as he placed the same cup I'd used to splash 42 with last night on our lunch table. "Anything you'd like to tell me?"

I swallow hard. I thought I picked that up. I guess I didn't.

"Um." I'm doing my best not to panic. "D-d'you have anything you'd like to tell me?"

"Tell you what?" he said, his tone harsh.

"Wh… Why didn't you tell me that w-water disables his powers?" I asked. "Why are we using cattle prods?"

"Cattle prods force him to keep his distance. He can't bite or use his powers on you if he can't get close enough." He shook his head. "That's not what's important right now." He stood up and crossed the room, staring me down as he did. "Are you some sort of masochist?"

"Excuse me?"

"You've been going down there nearly every night."

"I h-have just as much right to be down there as you do."

"He throws you against the wall. You're lucky you've not cracked your skull open."

I clench my fists.

"Don't pretend you care about me," I say, angry now. "I heard you talking to Eckert. You're trying to get rid of me–"

"Because you don't belong here."

It stung to hear it come directly from him. I didn't know what to say, so I said nothing.

“I noticed that you quit taking care of yourself. I know you heard me talking to Eckert,” he said, his voice just barely hiding his anger. “You are not strong enough to be here. You never should’ve been hired for this position in the first place.”

“… You knew I heard you?”

“I had my suspicions. Your sudden need to cut me out of your life certainly wasn’t subtle.” He glared at me. “But that’s not the point.”

“What is the point then?”

“You think I haven’t figured out why you insist on sleeves? That I haven’t caught glimpses of your wrists? Your scars?”

I didn’t how to respond to him bringing up something so personal, so I stare at him, my stomach immediately twisting into knots.

“You told me your father has schizoaffective disorder. Do you actually know what that is, or do you just know that he has it?”

“… What are you trying to say to me?”

“I think you’re a ticking time bomb. That not only are you physically unfit, but mentally as well. Tell me, how many friends have you made since you came here? How much time do you spend alone?”

My face feels numb. I’m angry, but I don’t know how to express it. So I say something stupid.

“I… I know you killed 47 with a cattle prod.”

His expression changes subtly.

“What are you talking about?”

“42. He… He’s not just a parrot. He can’t talk well, but he does talk. He communicates.”

He stares at me for a moment, before saying, “That’s called a delusion, Ejay.”

“What?”

“The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree, as they say, and you are the right age.” His lips curl into a partial smile. “Animals don’t talk. You’re seeing meaning where there is none.”

I’m quiet. I don’t know how to respond to that.

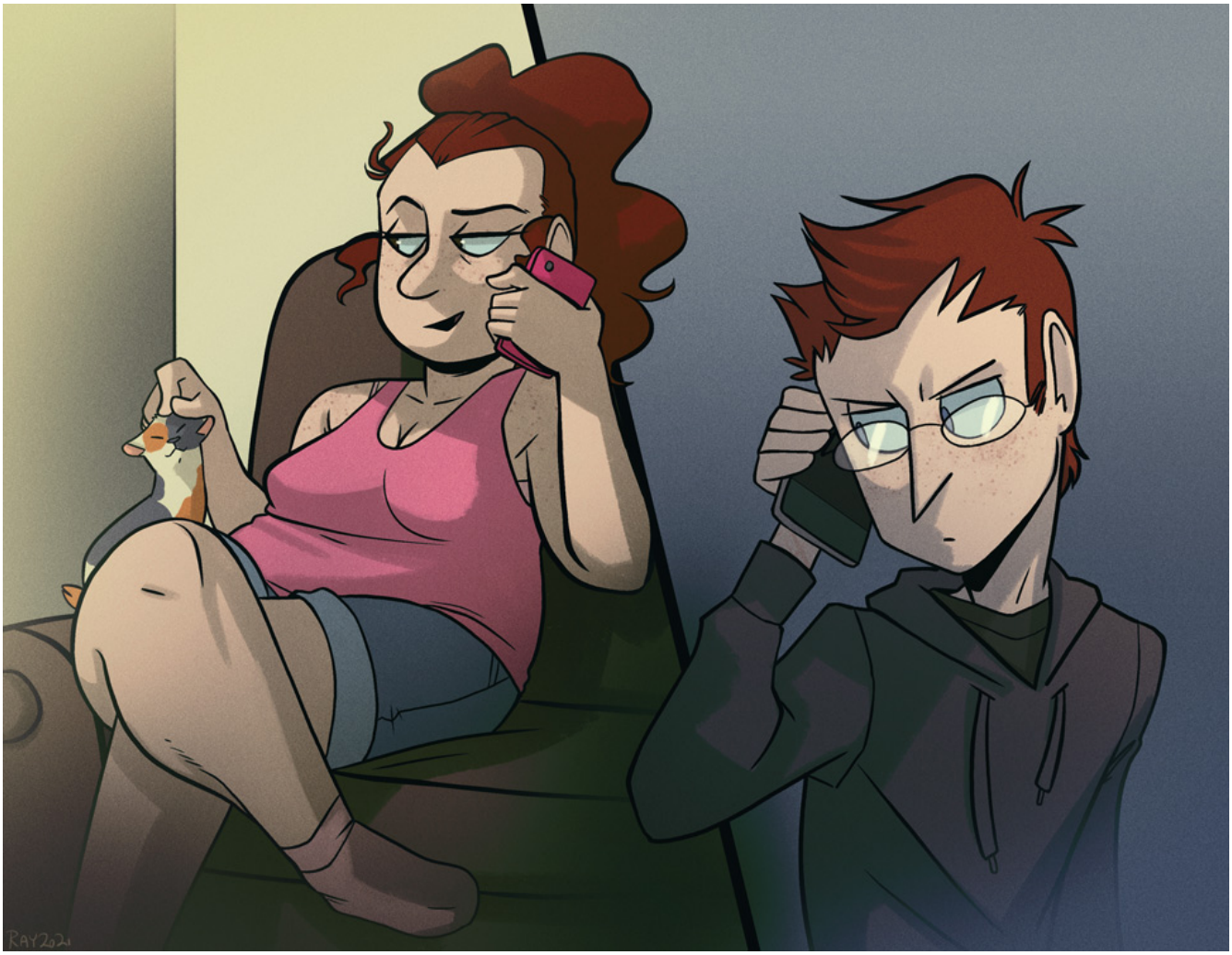
“I think it would be best,” Dieter began, “if you went to the storeroom and continued digitizing those tapes now.”

I stood there, wanting to say more, to defend myself.

But I couldn’t get myself to speak.

I turned, went back downstairs, and returned to the storeroom to do my job, and cry.

Chapter 6: June



For the next week, I was in a haze. I didn't do any of the things I'd planned on restarting. I hadn't called Eckert yet, either. Dieter was only able to make sure I was still turning up to work by checking the storeroom, although he didn't speak to me. I just couldn't shake off what he'd said, even though I knew he was wrong.

He had to be wrong.

I'm not delusional. And even if I am, I wouldn't become like my dad, would I?

That's what really scared me about what Dieter had said. If I was having a delusion about 42, I was already in denial about it. My dad would never admit he had a problem, despite everything he went through, despite what the house looked like. He would deny he needed help.

I still have very vivid, frightening memories of my father stomping up and down the main hall of our house, desperately flipping lights on and off and tapping on walls in sequence for hours at a time, convinced that if he did it just right, then myself and the neighbors would stop hearing his thoughts. It

was hell for him, but absolutely terrifying for me, a small child at the time. Was that going to be my future? Is 42 really just an animal, and am I seeing coherence where there isn't any?

It's a slippery slope into drunken violence from there, isn't it? I think that scares me more; that instead of seeking help for my delusions, I'll self-medicate with alcohol, like he did. I'm a socially anxious mess, but I can still force myself to talk to people right now. What if it turns out I do have what he does, and by the time I actually need help, I can't get myself to talk to a doctor? What if it's just easier to drink myself into a stupor? Not that I drink at all in the first place, but regardless, between a doctor visit and booze, the booze is what's more accessible.

I wish I could just turn my brain off. I've never been any good at controlling my own thoughts, but this was such an intense fear of mine that all I could do was ruminate. I hated Dieter for saying what he'd said. For causing this week of mental agony. I'd taken to internally counting my steps, and how many times I'd touch the VHS tapes I was digitizing, and and how many times I'd touch the VCR and the computer, and I'd count keystrokes, I was just… counting, counting, counting. That itself was a form of hell, but it would temporarily distract me from thoughts about turning into my father.

… What if this was a symptom of something? Do other people choose their thoughts, or are their brains also just a noisy mess of preoccupations and worries and attempts at coping? What if this is actually completely normal and I'm just… suffering under life, the way my aunt told me I would?

I think Dieter is waiting for me to quit at this point.

I feel like it's only a matter of time now before I'm let go, anyway.

But right now, I need to see 42.

It's after midnight.

I can't sleep.

I make my way through security. They shuffle through my things as I stand in the body scanner, and trade phones with me on my way out. I walk through the halls. The entire point of going in this late is because I know Dieter won't be there.

But I need to see 42 again. I need to hear him talk to me.

I enter the observation deck. I go downstairs. I enter the enclosure.

He's there, in his corner. Asleep.

"H…Hey, kiddo," I say softly.

He perks up and looks at me. He looks confused to see me there.

"'Jay," he says sleepily, rubbing his eyes.

It was relieving to hear him try and say my name.

I sit down next to him, and he reaches one of his little hands out toward me. I take it gingerly in my palm, and rub the back of it with my thumb. His fur is soft, and his hand feels fragile. He stares at me sleepily before leaning against me and closing his eyes again.

We sit with each other for a while, both of us nodding in and out of sleep.

For the first time since Dieter made me doubt myself, my brain is quiet.

I thought back to our first encounter, when he immediately attacked Dale and I. I couldn't believe this was already half a year ago.

42 just needed someone to listen.

I needed someone who needed me.

I pull the yellow flip phone from my pocket, and dial Eckert's office. It rings a few times, and then goes to voicemail, as expected.

I wait for the tone that signaled I could leave a message.

Beep.

"H… Hi, this is… Eric Collins. I work in the X. lux department, w-with Robert Dieter. Several months ago, one of the two Xs here died of a heart defect? I… I think I might… have evidence of that not quite being accurate. If you could find time to talk to me, that would be great. Thank you."

I hang up, and return it to my pocket.

I look down at 42.

… He really needs a name.

"Do you like being called '42'?" I ask him.

"42?" he says. I don't think he understood my question.

I stare at him. He looks a little bit like a cat to me. Sort of. If I squint.

"What d'you think of the name 'Leon'?" I ask him.

He's quiet for a moment.

And then he snuggles up to me, hugging onto my arm. I pet his head gently with my free hand. The name 'Leon' means 'king'. After what he's been through, the poor little guy deserves to be treated like one. I wasn't sure if he understood I was trying to name him, but I certainly wasn't going to pass up the attention.

After another hour of cuddling, I need to get up and go home. This upsets him greatly. He cries and clings to my leg.

I think he was tired of being alone. The last time he had someone to cuddle with was when 47 was still alive, before I was here. I myself couldn't remember the last time somebody hugged me, so I understood. I assure him that I'll be back, which seems to calm him down some, and I take my leave.

It hurts that I can't be with him as much as he wants me to be.

—

I accept what seeing him at midnight does to my sleep schedule not with ease, but willingly. Seeing him every night motivates me to start taking care of myself again–three meals a day, exercise after work. It's harder than it sounds to keep up with that–if I wasn't nauseous, I was sore. If I wasn't sore, I was nauseous. But I was determined. I wanted to be healthy for this little kid that I now felt I needed to protect and be there for.

I placed an order for a children's book to read to him. The more time I spend with him and talk to him, the more he seems able to puzzle together how words and sentences work. He's still far from fluent, but I figure introducing him to a story might be nice. I'm sure nobody's ever read to him before.

Nobody's ever read to me before, either.

It took two weeks for Eckert to finally get back to me, and it was only to schedule a meeting time a month in the future. He seemed mildly disinterested in what I had to say, though I was sure to insist to him that 42 could talk, that he wasn't just parroting words he'd heard, and that he saw what happened.

I feel like some of his disinterest probably stems from the things Dieter had to say about me. I hope not. I hope he wasn't planning on transferring me, or worse. Maybe discovering something about this kid that nobody else had been able to pick up on would be enough for me to solidify myself as an asset to the project.

Maybe I just wasn't good at reading his tone, and the disinterest I thought I heard was just him being too busy.

I genuinely feel like, without me, Leon didn't have a chance. How could he when up to this point, everyone with power over him treated him like an animal? Discounted him as nothing more than an expensive lab rat?

The nightmares I usually had about my father or my aunt were being replaced with what-ifs about what would happen to Leon if I ever had to leave. I didn't know which topic was worse.

I couldn't stop thinking about it. The anxiety was eating me–it was enough to relapse, but I didn't. If I did, and Dieter found out, I didn't want to hear what he'd have to say. Scars were one thing; fresh cuts were something else. I felt a discovery like that would definitely lose me my job, and lose me Leon.

We needed each other too much for me to let that happen. It was almost surreal, having at least one real reason not to hurt myself for once.

Speaking of hurting myself…

I stare at my phone, at the caller ID, as it buzzes in my hand.

My aunt is calling me.

I hesitate. What could she possibly want? Surely she wasn't calling to see how I was doing? What could I have done all the way over here that would warrant a phone call? Or is she calling to yell at me because I haven't called her?

Is my cat okay?

That last thought makes me answer.

"H-Hi, Lori," I say nervously.

"Eric, hi! How're you doing over there?"

"Um." The cheeriness of her tone surprises me, but the use of a name she knows I hate does not. "P-Pretty good, actually," I lie. She doesn't need to know what's going on at the moment. "How's it going over there?"

"Oh, you know, same old, same old," she says. "I just got off a long shift, thought I'd give my favorite nephew a call."

"Heh." I'm not really sure what else to say.

"So this new job of yours, are you really hanging in there alright? You don't wanna come back home at all? Luci and Pepper both miss you."

"Y-Yeah, I'm… I'm good here."

"You don't sound good."

"I promise I am."

"It's just I know you had so much trouble keeping up with your other jobs, and–"

"What… what do you want?" I say, beginning to lose patience.

"You think I want something?"

"You normally do."

"I just wanna make sure you're doing okay," she repeats. "It's been six months since I've heard anything from you, for all I know, you've died and no one's said anything."

"I think they would've contacted you if something happened to me," I say flatly.

"I mean, they might not–"

“They would. You’re the only person I have for my emergency contact.”

“Ah.” There’s a brief pause, and then, “Well, since you mention it, there is one thing I’ve been thinking about.”

There it is.

“It’s really a lot of work taking care of Luci for you while you’re all the way out there. There’s feeding her, playing with her, cleaning the litter box, I just had to take her for her shots this week… I really wish you would’ve rehomed her before leaving, honestly, especially since I just don’t know when you’ll be coming home to visit. Pepper is a handful, too, but Tim would roll over in his grave if I gave her up.”

My brows furrow. “Are… are you saying you want to get rid of my cat?”

“No, nothing like that,” she replies. “I’m just saying it would be nice if you gave me a little money every month for the trouble.

“…How much?”

“$500 sounds fair to me,” she says. “That covers vet, food, any new toys–”

“Are you fucking serious?” I ask, dumbfounded.

“Watch your language. Yes, I’m serious,” she snaps. “I mean, unless you do want me to take her to the shelter–”

“No, I mean. I-I don’t mind giving you a little money to take care of my cat, but half a grand? Every month?”

“If anything ever happens to her, I just want to be prepared. Animals are a big commitment, and even if you’re all the way out there, I want her to be cared f–”

“She’s an indoor cat, nothing’s going to happen to her.”

“You don’t know. She might end up with a tumor one day, or an intestinal blockage, or God knows what, and where is the money going to come from to take care of that? Would you rather I just put her down?”

“No, I–”

“Then what’s the problem? I thought you loved this cat.”

I stand there, quietly seething at the fact her guilt tripping was working. It always worked on me. “Fine. What’s your bank info? I can schedule payments.”

She gives me her info, I set up the bank transfers, and, having gotten what she wanted, we wrap up the conversation shortly after.

I make more money than I'd ever need at this job anyway; despite her wanting a lot out of me, that part's not the issue. What annoys me is that I know she's not going to use it for my cat. She never uses the money I give her for what she says she will. She saves it away for herself to use on whatever expensive thing she wants later. This was just more of that, and I knew it.

My income has basically always been hers. Especially when she found out I'd been hired here–she took almost everything from me, and I felt I had no choice but to pay her if I wanted to keep a roof over my head. I was so thin when I got here because she was essentially starving me. I wasn't allowed to eat her food, but she was hardly leaving me enough money to feed myself.

I always figured she wanted me out of the house as soon as possible what with how much she put me through, but her actions toward the end told me it was the opposite–she had it good, what with my income and the additional work around the house I'd do for her. She didn't want to lose me. She was squeezing me for everything she could while she still had me there to do it, and she was squeezing me some more now.

It made a little more sense now, why she'd always tell me I wasn't ready for the world. She made me drop out of high school so I could start working full time. My grades were never bad, but she made me think that I had no future other than being at home with her, using the fact I had trouble making friends as the main reason.

"If you can't make friends, how can you expect an employer at a real job to want anything to do with you?" she'd said.

Holding onto this job had become the most important thing in the world to me, not just for Leon, but for myself. At this point, I saw suicide in my future if I lost it. It was so hard to find it in the first place that I didn't see myself finding another, and I refuse to live in her house again.

I can't hear you say "I told you so" if I'm dead.

Chapter 7: July

In three more weeks I'd be seeing Eckert. I'd taken to calling him every other day, to see if I could get the appointment bumped up a bit.

He ignored me.

I continued my nightly visits with Leon. I'd begun staying later and later. He'd always get so sad when I'd leave–I hated doing that to him. The book I'd ordered for him came in after not too long. I had to explain to him what a story was. It was interesting, watching him trying to grasp this brand new concept. He had no idea that written language was even a thing, and he'd never seen an illustration before, either. His confusion and then gradual excitement was both adorable and sad.

I was beginning to have trouble seeing him as anything other than a normal kid who just happened to look a little different. Maybe he'd never fully grasp speech, but honestly? That's fine. He liked to play. He did his best to learn. He never used his powers around me anymore, either.

I wondered what the other staff here thought of him–we did have janitors and people who'd come in and feed him. It was more than just Dieter and I. It was strange that I'd not had an opportunity to meet

them yet. Not that I particularly wanted to–people made me nervous. I just… felt like we should've been introduced at some point.

Hell, it was strange to me that Eckert himself was so hands-off. I guess getting our digital reports was enough for him.

While continuing the monumental task of digitizing nearly 30 years worth of VHS footage, I'd think about what new thing I'd try to teach him that night. Maybe I'd try flash cards again. I was considering ordering toys to see if he had a preference for more imaginary play rather than physical. Maybe he'd like some crayons so he could–

My thoughts are interrupted by a knock at the door.

If it were Dieter, he would've just come in.

"Uhh… yes?" I say awkwardly, not knowing what to expect.

I hear the beep of the lock on the other side of the door, and a man who had to be at least six and a half feet tall entered. He was in his early fifties with salt and pepper hair and dark eyes to match.

"Eric, right?" he asks.

I sit there quietly for a moment, intimidated by the large man standing in front of me.

This was Sean Eckert. Our boss. I'd met him only once before; on my first day here.

"Sure, y-yeah, that's… that's me," I say, feeling comically small in comparison. "What… what brings you here?"

"You and Bob being the most annoying sons o' bitches I know," he says with a shrug. "Clearly, you two can't settle your differences on your own, so I would like to put an end to this… whatever it is that's going on between you two, now. And I would like to see for myself whether or not 42 is talking."

My heart begins racing.

This was it.

"I hope it's not a problem I came down here without telling either of you. Figured a surprise visit may be best."

"I-It's fine! It's completely fine," I say, my voice cracking. I cough and stand up straight. "Y-You want me upstairs, or?"

"Upstairs would be preferred."

"A-alright, um," I stand there, a bit frozen to the spot.

He gestures at the door after an awkward moment. "Lead the way."

Stiffly, and with my posture held low, I make my way forward, and out into the hall. He follows me up the stairs into the observation deck, where Dieter is already waiting for us, sitting at the small table that we'd usually use for our lunch break.

"Found him," says Eckert casually.

Dieter says nothing, a thinly veiled look of annoyance on his face.

"Sit down, Eric," says Eckert, gesturing toward a chair across from him, and next to Dieter. I sit. Unsure of what to do with my hands, I keep them in my lap, nervously picking at my fingernails under the table.

"So," he begins, looking in Dieter's direction, "you say that Eric isn't physically or mentally fit enough for this job." He looks at me. "But you say my employee of 11 years over here killed one of the multi million dollar critters we're here to study."

"I can prove it," I say, trying my best to keep my voice steady.

"We'll get to that." He turns back to Dieter, his body language aloof. "What is your biggest concern with Eric here?"

"That he's going to get himself killed," responds Dieter without hesitation. "He is barely over five feet tall, and he's underweight. He has no business being here in his condition, especially if he doesn't intend to improve upon it."

Eckert looks at me now, his expression cool. "Do you intend to improve upon it?"

"O-of course. I-I've been trying, I… I've been trying to eat more, and I've been going to the gym every night for the last few weeks now. Y-You can check my access logs if you don't believe me, I–"

"Only the last few weeks?"

I fall silent for a moment. "W-well… I got… really discouraged when I found out Dieter didn't want me here. I thought you were going to fire me."

"What made you change your mind?"

I couldn't help but notice that Dieter's expression has shifted from annoyance, to frustrated confusion.

"I need to keep this jo–"

"Sean, why are you humoring him?" Dieter asks, interrupting me.

Eckert raises an eyebrow. "Well, I don't know if you've noticed, but you're not exactly in your prime yourself."

Dieter frowns. "I'm sorry?"

“You heard me. I’m sorry to be so blunt about it, Bob, but you’re getting old. One good, hard hit from that little guy down there could take you out just as easily as it could Eric. But Eric can get better, and he’s trying.”

Dieter glares. He seems to want to say something in his defense, but instead he changes the subject. “What about his mental health? He thinks that thing actually talks. A close relative of his apparently suffers from schizoaffective disorder–do you think it’s a good idea to trust someone like him with work like this?”

Eckert falls silent for a moment, then turns to me. “You had a psychiatric evaluation before coming here, correct?”

“Y-Yes.”

“And if it turned out you were you were mentally unfit to work, would you be here right now?”

“Probably not.”

Eckert shrugs, and looks at Dieter again. “Bob, I understand your concerns, but you don’t have a case here. There’s nothing wrong with him that he isn’t already working on, and even if there were, there’s medication and therapy for that, which his insurance covers. You have to let him do his job. And I don’t mean segregate him off into that closet to do the techy stuff you don’t like, I mean actually allow him to interact with our subject.”

He pauses for a moment, as if waiting for Dieter to respond. When he doesn’t, he continues. “You wanna know why I hired somebody like him?” said Eckert. “Because despite his size, Eric is one of the most hard working, determined people I’ve ever brought onto the project. I’ve seen how much he’s able to do–frankly, I’m surprised he hasn’t snapped. We need people like him here.”

Dieter looks like he’s seething. He shakes his head, and says, “Fine.”

“Are we done with this weird feud now? Can we be adults?” he asks. “I had to reschedule something pretty important to come down here today for this.”

“Yes. Of course,” says Dieter bitterly.

“Now Eric,” Eckert says as he stands. “Why don’t you show me what you’ve learned about 42?”

I jump to my feet and quickly make my way over to the door that leads to the enclosure. “Y-yes sir, I-I’d love to,” I stammer, my voice cracking again.

“Slow down, kid, it’s not a race,” he says as he follows me. He looks off in Dieter’s direction. “You come, too.”

All three of us head down. Eckert and Dieter both grab cattle prods and lab coats. I don’t.

“Uh, he… he doesn’t like the cattle prods much,” I say nervously. “You might want to leave them behind.” I look at Dieter. “Especially you.”

Dieter glares. “I will do no such thing.”

I look at Eckert, pleadingly.

He stares at me for a moment before saying, “You’re going to at least wear a lab coat if you’re heading in there.”

I stand there for a bit before grabbing a coat off the hook. “Fine. But those awful things you’re holding are gonna make this harder.”

We enter the enclosure. Immediately, Leon runs up to hug me around my legs, but then backs off and lights up when he sees Dieter, a growl forming in his throat.

He hisses.

I approach Leon and kneel down in front of him, ignoring his power use completely. “I need you to be brave for me, okay?”

Leon looks over in Eckert’s direction. “Who that? Big.”

Eckert tilts his head. “Asking questions?”

Dieter opens and closes his mouth a few times, unsure of what to say. He chooses to say nothing.

I grab Leon by his wrists, and force him to look at me. “Stop.”

He stares into my eyes for a moment, and then does as he’s told, the orange light of his abilities snuffing out.

I point at Eckert. “The big man over there is named Eckert,” I say to him calmly. “He wants to know what happened to 47.”

He makes a buzzing noise, clearly worried about the cattle prods.

“He won’t hurt you.” I take his little hand in mine, and begin guiding him toward Dieter and Eckert, who are both staring at us. Eckert’s expression is one of fascination, while Dieter’s is unreadable to me.

“Tell him what you told me,” I say to him. “I know it’s scary, but he wants to help.”

Leon stands there, leaning against me.

Eckert leans his cattle prod against the wall, and begins approaching Leon. He crouches down to his eye level. “42–” he begins, but Leon cuts him off.

“Leon,” he says.

Eckert looks up at me, confusion on his face.

“Um. I… might’ve… named him. I hope that’s okay.”

Eckert stares at me a moment longer. “That’s… a strange choice, but okay.” He returns his attention to Leon.

“Leon. Do you have something you need to tell me?”

Leon stands there quietly. And then, “D-Dieter… 47.”

He pokes Eckert hard in the chest while making a buzzing noise, and then promptly falls over. “Him… no up. No get up.” Leon moves to a sitting position. He places his hands on Eckert’s knee and begins shaking it. “47…” he said. He then began repeating his friend’s name, as if he were reliving the event, louder and louder.

I kneel down, and see that he’s crying. “Hey, hey–” I reach for him, and he clings onto me. I hug him back.

Eckert stays where he is, dumbfounded.

He gets to his feet, and turns to Dieter.

Dieter is quiet for a moment, before saying, “He… obviously trained him to do that.”

“No, I didn’t.” I look at Eckert. “There should be footage of this. Of him, and me, and him doing that exact same chest poking thing. I wouldn’t have had time to teach him that–everything before then, he’s just throwing me out of the room. There’s proof.”

“When?”

“Back in May. I can help you track it down if you want.”

I turn to Dieter. “Why won’t you believe that he can talk?”

Dieter doesn’t say a word, although there’s something in his eyes. Guilt? Fear?

Eckert is quiet for a moment. He frowns, as if realizing something. “You know, I didn’t think it was important at the time, but…” his voice trails off, and he shakes his head.

“I’ve seen enough. Let’s head back up.”

I give Leon one more gentle squeeze before letting him go. “You did great, kiddo.”

Epilogue: August

Over the course of the next few weeks, a lot had been brought to light. Eckert had the investigation into the missing camera footage reopened. It turned out, the guy who did it was Dieter's friend and neighbor. Dieter had paid him $100k to nuke all the footage from that day, figuring having all footage gone instead of just what was specific to him would make it look like an unfortunate coincidence. Considering Dieter had an upstanding record until now, they never even thought to suspect he had anything to do with it.

47 did in fact have a heart defect, that much was true. It was a blessing to Dieter at the time–he didn't have to say a word about what he'd done, instead stating repeatedly that 47 had simply dropped dead. The truth was, Dieter had gotten frustrated and ended up shocking the poor kid over and over again. 47's already fragile heart stopped due to the misuse.

Dieter had, of course, been fired, but not before giving me a parting gift–he'd punched me in the face. I had the broken glasses and black eye to prove it. In his eyes, I'd basically stolen his retirement from him.

I do feel guilty about that. He was kind to me at the start, and everything he did after he quit being so kind was out of a need to not see me hurt. But at the same time, child abusers and killers don't deserve

pity. Neither do animal abusers, for that matter. At least, this is how I tried to convince myself he deserved what he got.

With Dieter gone, this made me the lead researcher of the X. lux department. I was also the only researcher now. I had never been in charge of anything before, and frankly, it's terrifying.

But this gave me certain privileges that I didn't have before, such as the ability to ask for changes to the enclosure, which were sorely needed. I'd put in a request to have twelve separate rooms built. Twelve, because there were twelve subjects planned, but also so that Leon could have a private place to sleep that wasn't in the main enclosure area. They were complete with their own small quarter bathrooms. Speaking of bathrooms, I'm working toward toilet training him–he'd been using something that was basically a litter box before.

I had to compromise on the bathing situation, though–Eckert wouldn't allow a private shower to each room. Instead, there was a shower comparable to one you'd find in a gym or a dorm going in.

As a result of everything going on, Leon and I had become nearly inseparable. He'd be with me in the observation deck while I worked with Eckert to coordinate the coming changes, or he'd be with me in the storeroom while I worked on digitizing more tapes. The only time we weren't together were the times I had to go home.

He hated being alone. I couldn't wait for there to be more kids for him to play with, not because I was sick of him clinging, but because I couldn't stand seeing how distressing it was for him every time I had to leave. I was considering asking Eckert to hire night staff as well, so if he needed someone late at night, he had them. Although I was beginning to become suspicious that Leon was actually nocturnal, so maybe other arrangements needed to be made.

All in all, the enclosure was going to become more child friendly one way or another. I'd even requested that we look into hiring someone trained with kids to take my old job. Eckert was still on the fence about that. I could tell that he was hesitant to humanize Leon and the other kids who were sure to come eventually, and it's not that I didn't understand why.

I tried to frame it as, "for the sake of more accurate behavioral data," which I think helped sway his thoughts a little bit, but I was rapidly developing my own agenda.

The next 14 years are going to be interesting.